

A barrage of balloons air fury of fans

92/93

THE BALLOON went up before Luton's 3-1 home defeat by Derby. Well, actually, lots of them and all bearing the simple request: 'Kohler Out'.

The angry and frustrated people who released them in a mass protest are a significant section of Luton's dwindling support, determined to drive out the man they blame for the club's current plight, second to bottom of the First Division and in free-fall towards the trap door to obscurity.

At the moment, David Kohler's popularity rating lies somewhere between Saddam Hussein, Jacques Delors and John Major and the battle has become so bitter that, a couple of weeks ago, he returned home to north London from a match to find his house and road plastered with unflattering posters. It's got that bad.

Remarkably, Luton's 34-year-old self-appointed managing director, retains his sense of humour and philosophical air but that could just have been the straw that broke the camel's back.

'They can pay their money at the turnstiles and shout and scream all they like but when it spreads into your private life it's time to call it a day. Yes, I have had enough, but if I walk away today Luton Town would

JIM HOOLEY examines the problems of a club living beyond its means

be in liquidation tomorrow. Quite simply, I pay the wages. If someone comes in with £500,000 which would cover what I have put in personally, they can have the club.'

The most likely candidate is Sheffield businessman Keith Haslam, son of the popular former Luton manager Harry Haslam. Negotiations are at a delicate stage.

So what has gone wrong in the three years since Kohler and his former business partner Peter Nelkin bought the club and arrived with grandiose plans to relocate the recent Littlewoods Cup winners and build a 30,000 all-seater stadium for them?

That was their first mistake. The club have been attempting to move from its restricted little ground for 20 years but there have always been too many NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard).

The second mistake came at the end of their first season when the reward for manager Jim Ryan, who had kept the club in the First Division by the skin of their teeth, was to sack the former popular player within 48 hours. The fans have never forgiven that. Nelkin is long gone. The aftermath of

the Ryan sacking was hate mail and Nelkin left the club to Kohler.

There is a simple economic equation which explains Luton's chronic problems. The current annual wage bill is £2.3million, their income £1m. 'Try making that up in sponsorship and commercial activity in this crippling recession, especially with a club that has been relegated,' Kohler said.

To survive, Luton have done what they have always had to do — sell their best assets, including Mark Pembridge to Derby for £1.5m. What is left for manager David Pleat is a collection of talented kids being asked to do a man's job.

Their gutsy but naive performance was eventually subdued by Derby with two opportunist headers from Paul Kitson and a third via Kitson's sublime pass and Tommy Johnson's clinical finish.